**Unplugged: an European school-based program effective in preventing tobacco, alcohol and drug use among adolescents**

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**Background**

In the school-based drug abuse prevention field, a large number of programs have been developed. However, the effectiveness of the programs has not always been evaluated. Among those evaluated with proper methods, only skill-based programs seem to be effective. Effective prevention programs should include enhancement of intra and interpersonal skills, focus on norms and information on prevalence of drug use. Most of the effective programs included in the Cochrane review were conducted in the United States. Recognizing a lack of research on effectiveness in Europe, the EC funded in 2003 the EU-Dap multicentric study in order to design and evaluate a newly developed European program, named Unplugged.

**Methods**

Unplugged is the first school-based prevention program developed in an international collaboration in Europe. It was designed by an international group of experts experienced in drug use prevention in the frame of EU-Dap study. It is based on the comprehensive social influence approach, and includes training of personal and social skills with a specific focus on normative beliefs. It was implemented and evaluated through a randomised controlled trial conducted between 2004 and 2006. In the second phase of the project (EU-Dap 2), the teacher handbook was largely revised, mainly based on teacher feedback. Moreover, to complement the new teacher’s handbook, a student’s workbook was developed, intended as a personal workbook of the student, and containing activities that students are to work through during the Unplugged units. The cards for lesson 9 have also been revised. A new appealing graphic version was developed, and the new program, together with the student workbook and the cards, is freely available in the project website (www.eudap.net).

**Results**

Unplugged is a strongly interactive program and represents a standardized package program consisting of 12 units, carried out by the school teachers. The effectiveness evaluation showed that the program is effective in preventing cigarette use, drunkenness episodes and use of cannabis among 12-14 years old students. The effect on drunkenness and cannabis was maintained at 1 year follow-up.

The teachers receive specific training prior to the implementation of the program. Teachers’ training is a crucial component to ensure a high-quality implementation of the program. Detailed instructions for implementing the units are described in the teacher’s handbook and specific material is provided in the student’s workbook: the units have a standard structure, a specific time schedule, encompassing an overarched theme, objectives, a list of at “hand-on” materials, a suggested introductory activity, a detailed description of the core activities, and a closure part.

Unit 1 introduces the program to the pupils, explaining what the program is about, setting objectives and establishing some rules for all the program to create a respectful climate. Units 3, 5 and 9 are designed to deal mainly with adolescents’ knowledge and attitudes. The students are prompted to start a reflection on their level of knowledge on drugs (also alcohol and tobacco). The cards for the quiz on drugs and drug use (available also in the teacher handbook) are used to help reach an objective appraisal of knowledge level.

Units 2, 7 and 8 deal with interpersonal components: students can practice refusal skills, assertive attitudes and coping strategies. Suggestions for working interactively in small groups with role-play and “energizers” (group dynamic games) and material containing information on drugs and prevalence of drug use complete the handbook.

**Conclusions**

Unplugged is a school-based prevention program endowed by scientific evidence of effectiveness and easily delivered in a standardised form: this makes it suitable to be disseminated in the different contexts of the European schools as well as to be adaptable to several language and culture-specific settings.